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ABSTRACT

An Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) Program comprised four projects designed to integrate new research with analysis of past practices and provision. Preliminary themes were the perception of a "policy void" in regard to literacy and numeracy skills; professional development's tie to workplace practice and understanding of and compliance with reporting mechanisms; and problems when literacy and numeracy are collapsed as one. The project called "Women at Play" explored whether teaching women to write dramatic monologue helps them develop multiliteracies and cope with life transitions. Women developed confidence and skills to develop monologues and literacy skills through collaborative criticism of each other's work. In the project called "Curricular Practices of Adult Community Education, Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Providers in South Australia," community-based literacy practitioners investigated ways they make decisions about their practice to examine the "hidden" curriculum of their programs. Findings indicated that the "hidden" curriculum of community-based programs encourages development of social capital; participants came with widely varied backgrounds and previous learning experiences; programs are nonformal and flexible and English as a second language accounts for the greatest part of programs rather than literacy; and literacy is adaptive to the diversity of multicultural Australia. (YLB)

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Feature

The Role of Adult Literacy & Numeracy in Lifelong Learning and Socio-Economic Well-Being: ALNARC National Research Program June 2001-June 2002

Dr. Sue Shore

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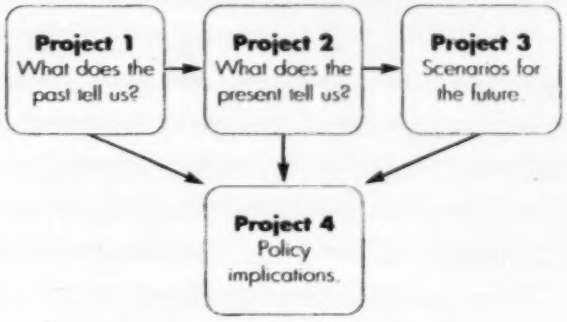
The role of adult literacy & numeracy in lifelong learning and socio-economic well-being

ALNARC national research program June 2001-June 2002

*By **Dr. Sue Shore**, Chair, National Committee of ALNARC Directors*

Globalisation, technological change and organisational development have brought about profound changes in literate and numerate practices across the western world. OECD research notes that higher levels of literacy skill are now required for work and socio-economic participation. However, between one quarter and three quarters of adults have difficulty attaining a literacy level considered by experts as the suitable minimum skill level for coping with the demands of modern life and work. In addition, there is increasing pressure from cross-sectoral policy initiatives for responsive and flexible strategies and demands for a stronger emphasis on evidence on which to base policy related decision making.

In response to these concerns the *Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium* (ALNARC) submitted a research workplan to DEST to meet the June 2001 - May 2002 national research program requirements. The program comprised four major projects designed to integrate new research with an analysis of past practices and provision. The research program aimed to provide a number of forms of empirical evidence as a potential basis for future policy development in the adult literacy and numeracy field.



The following diagram illustrates how the four projects provided the conceptual basis on which the national program was devised.

The design of the program enabled researchers to investigate similar problems from different perspectives, receive feedback from field based educators, managers and researchers and contribute to ongoing debates about Australian policy research and provision. Some preliminary themes in the research program are flagged below.

Many people have long recognized the complexity of literacy and numeracy skills and understand the difficulty of responding to such an issue given the cross-sectoral collaboration and complex decision making involved across systems and states. Currently there is a sense in which policy makers, managers and educators perceive a 'policy void'. Whilst people are reluctant to talk of the 1990s as the 'good old days' many participants noted the usefulness of having a clear and visible policy position (as exemplified in the ALLP) and an explicit strategy of Commonwealth/state cooperation (as exemplified by the National Collaborative Adult English Language and Literacy Strategy - NCAELLS) against which to benchmark systemic practice. Clearly there is some recognition that the Australian adult literacy and numeracy sector has offered international benchmarks for systemic leadership and these benchmarks can be usefully explored in terms of the structures and systemic collaborations needed to meet the demands of lifelong learning and training challenges and opportunities in the future.

Other issues emerged from a series of case studies of practice in work and lifelong learning programs. For some educators there is increasing concern that professional development is tied to workplace practice and their understanding of and compliance with reporting mechanisms. Participants recognize the importance of efficient methods of reporting on learning progress however many also acknowledge the limited opportunities to engage in professional debate that is curiosity driven and critically attentive to existing curricula and assessment frameworks. The increasing casualisation of educators' work and the impact it has on quality teaching is also a cause for concern.

In the area of numeracy the research suggests that little is known about Australian rates of numeracy, but more importantly numeracy is often understood and interpreted through the lens of literate social practices. Whilst there are similarities, the collapsing of literacy and numeracy as one presents a number of problems for understanding particular pedagogies based around numeracy learning. Collapsing the ESL/ALBE interface, and merging adult literacy and adult education programs as one, cause similar concerns where teachers and program managers believe the needs of both teachers and learners cannot be equated without analysis of the differences that count across these programs. Much of this work points to important research to be done on the relationships between generic skills, language, literacy and numeracy, and the necessary professional preparation required for trainers and educators to teach across these programs.

Preliminary findings of projects from this year's program, and previous research programs (for example the 1999 and 2000 research programs) can be found on the ALNARC website http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc. Numerous other issues are emerging from the analysis of the results and ALNARC researchers will be presenting on these themes at a range of conferences over the next year, once reports have been received by the Commonwealth.

FUTURE FUNDING

ALNARC directors have been advised by DEST that the funding for adult literacy and numeracy research, previously received by ALNARC under Adult Literacy National Project funding, will, in the future, be managed by NCVER. Hence ALNARC, as a nationally funded consortium, will not be in a position to provide future funding for practitioner research grants, a prominent feature of past research programs. More optimistically we hope to be in a position to use the experience gained from mentoring and conducting research over the last three years to examine opportunities for national and international collaboration with other interested partners.

DOING LITERACY, DOING LITERACY RESEARCH: RESEARCHING PRACTICE IN ADULT LITERACY SETTINGS

In late 2001 reports from projects conducted as part of the South Australian program of ALNARC undertaken in 2000 were published in *Doing literacy, doing literacy research: researching practice in adult literacy settings*[1] The projects looked at; curriculum practices of adult community education; access to literacy services for women experiencing domestic violence; feminist objectives of women's education and literacy learning; drama and creative writing in literacy and accounts of research training done by educators.

Excerpts from two of the research projects are presented here.

WOMEN AT PLAY: FINDING THEIR VOICES THROUGH WRITING FOR PERFORMANCE

Liz Campbell

This project, conducted by Liz Campbell, explored the question of whether teaching women to write dramatic monologue helps them to develop multiliteracies and to cope with life transitions. To do this, Liz tracked the women's development, both in their creative writing and in their critical literacy skills. The project also considered the pedagogical implications of drawing on everyday life experiences as the basis for encouraging learners to participate in designing their social futures and, thereby, in social change.

Demystifying creativity

Liz shifted the pedagogical emphasis away from outcomes based on specific competencies and taught in a way that allowed the women to master skills such as oracy, critical listening and reading, computer literacy and team work in the process of engaging in a pleasurable and intellectually stimulating writing activity. As a practising writer, she wanted to demystify the notion of creativity. She took the position that truth relating to character lies in the detail taken from the lives of ordinary people. The work of the women, she believed, would gain in quality if they could be persuaded to draw on their own life experiences. This approach embodied the aim of assisting the women to be active designers - to make decisions about the directions in which they wanted to go with their writing and, consequently, their learning.

Negotiating a learning process

The process involved collaboration between the members of the group during structured feedback sessions in which they discussed each other's creative writing. The participants were exposed step by step to the various stages of writing and performance. Rules of interaction were negotiated to assist in the development of close relations within the group and a supportive environment in which the women could explore their creative writing over time. This strategy allowed the women to develop both the confidence and the skills to develop several monologues. In addition, the women developed many literacy skills through their collaborative criticism of each other's work - oracy, critical listening, analysing and posing appropriate questions, planning, negotiation of group dynamics and team work, decision making, and learning new technologies like word processing and using the internet.

Life experience: emotion in education

The closeness of the women to their subject matter raised highly emotive issues that needed to be negotiated during the feedback sessions. All of the women were living in far from affluent financial circumstances and were undergoing life transitions.

The need for negotiation in learning highlights the extent to which the exigencies of life can impinge on the learning process. Liz resisted becoming a counsellor, however, and encouraged the women to work through the issues in their writing - to focus on the process, to try another approach, to keep going. As the women themselves attest, in time and as their skills and confidence grew, this strategy encouraged the women to take control of their writing and learning by taking responsibility for their characterisation, feedback and participation. Their knowledge and life experiences were validated as they *became* the material that the women redesigned to fashion a meaning relevant to them through their monologues.

In this way, too, the learning process acknowledged the changing demands that are being placed upon people as 'makers of meaning' in the workplace, in public life, and in the community during a time of unprecedented technological and cultural change. To make learning relevant involves making connections between the learners' social contexts and experiences and the learning process - doing literacy, for example, while you're doing something else.

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1 Coombe M Shore S. Treverry R. (eds.) 2001 *Doing literacy, doing research: researching practice in adult literacy settings* Language Australia Melbourne

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Literacy is ...

Liz is quick to point out that literacy practitioners need not fear that they have to teach creative writing in order to teach literacy skills. Rather, her research emphasises the importance of a fun, collaborative process that draws on the experiences of learners *whatever the topic of learning*. By making connections between learning and the social contexts of learners, literacy learning is understood as a dynamic process and learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. This taking of responsibility is not about atomistic competition but collaboration. Her research shows that an environment of trust and support developed over time is important. If participants are allowed to engage in a meaningful journey of educational discovery, the outcomes will, in a sense, look after themselves.

THE CURRICULUM PRACTICES OF ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION, LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND NUMERACY PROVIDERS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Jan Peterson

Community-based literacy practitioners investigated the ways they make decisions about their practice in order to examine the 'hidden' curriculum of their programs. By 'hidden', the team meant the ways that community educators adapt the existing curriculum framework to meet the needs of their clients. These practices are not explicitly described or formalised.

The curriculum framework available to providers since 1995 is Certificate 1 in Preparatory Education (CPE), which is competency-based curriculum and incorporates modules aimed at developing basic skills. At times, competency-based curriculum has a tendency towards 'top down', market-driven approaches to education based on competition between educational providers.

Many community providers express concern, however, that a competency-based curriculum does not fit well with the non-formal, learner-centred, flexible, needs-based approach that they believe is a key characteristic and requirement of community provision. They argue that a 'grass roots' approach to programs is needed so that the programs will be authentically 'owned' by individual communities. Such methods necessarily mean that these programs are not homogenous but reflect the idiosyncrasies of the communities involved.

Peterson, writing for the team, argues that their research shows that the 'hidden' curriculum of community-based programs encourages the development of 'social capital' : the building of social and community networks through trust and the sharing of experiences, balanced by links to information and processes beyond learners' immediate context.

Who *Are* the Participants in Community Programs?

The practitioners recognise that participants come with widely varied backgrounds and previous learning experiences. In general, community participants are people who have perceived a need to learn to function better in a rapidly changing society. Few of the participants have work-related goals. Many are older people: they may be primary caregivers for children or they may have disabilities. The educational goals of these clients are principally the development of skills for greater independence and more effective community participation. A significant change in participation has been the loss of that segment of the client group that had clear vocational goals.

A Challenging Profile

The profile that emerges from the research does affirm long-held views that programs are non-formal and flexible, for instance by providing entry and exit to participants at any time. They provide the first step on learning pathways to further education, training and even employment but chiefly aim to assist participants to develop their confidence to take control of their learning.

The profile also challenges some of the long-held assumptions associated with the codification of delivery. For instance, the research shows that ESL, integrated since 1994, accounts for the greatest part of programs rather than literacy, which is of secondary focus. NESB people constitute the largest portion of participants.

The research also challenges the belief that the programs use the formal curriculum framework and have formalised processes for assessing entry-level skills of learners. Indeed, the most significant challenge is that their focus is primarily the development of basic language, literacy and numeracy skills. Rather than their codifying delivery and curriculum, changes to provision such as the introduction of the CPE and the integration of ESL with literacy, brought about by economic rationalist policies, have instead diversified design and delivery.

Designing social futures

The findings do not promote economic rationalist policies - they point to a key dimension of the 'hidden' curriculum. The most effective programs use diverse and flexible delivery modes and resources relevant to learners' experiences and daily needs. They also ensure that learners are included in decision-making about their learning. So learning goes beyond basic skills to the development of social capital, which involves shared values and the sharing of values, the development of trust and bonding through learning networks balanced by 'bridging ties' outside the group that link social capital to external information and knowledge. Like the learners in Liz Campbell's writing course, learners in the programs that Jan Peterson's research team investigated are being encouraged to '*design their social future*'[2]

2 New London Group 1997 *A pedagogy of multiliteracies: designing social futures Centre* for Workplace Communication and Culture (CWCC) NSW

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Programs typically use activities that assist in the development of everyday skills, including the cultural knowledge that learners need to select appropriate skills for a range of activities and contexts. Programs also use 'real world' events and activities as a starting point for an integrated approach to learning language and literacy.

Adults often join adult literacy programs when they are facing life changes. Involvement can be an opportunity for them to get the support they need to make successful transitions. Literacy often becomes 'a tool for healing emotional wounds'. Providers consciously aim for the development of learners' confidence and self-esteem as well as their social networks to help them to make choices in their lives and to take control of their learning.

So literacy provision in these programs involves learning while you do something other than literacy learning. It is more than the provision of basic skills. It is adaptive to the diversity of multicultural Australia and makes connections with the social contexts that learners see as important by using curriculum relevant to learners' lives, curriculum that is not formally codified and remains, to a large degree, hidden. Literacy provision in community-based programs is about social practice.

'While it is about communication, it is also about power, survival and independence, social acceptance and freedom from fear' (Peterson, 2001)

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Queries about the current program can also be directed to Ms Carolyn Ovens: carolyn.ovens@vu.edu.au

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Cost: *$13.20*

Learn2Learn: the web site

*By **Robyn Hodge**, content developer and writer.*

ARIS is pleased to announce that the Learn2Learn website is now loaded and operational on the World Wide Web. The site was developed with Innovative Literacy and Numeracy Project funding from ANTA, and is an interactive website for adults wanting information, activities and, most importantly, a bit of fun as they find out more about the skills required for effective learning and achieving new goals.

Adults thinking about returning to study or having to undertake training require a range of organisational and reasoning skills. Many people have and use some or all of these skills in their everyday lives, but have not had the opportunity to successfully transfer those skills to the training situation. The Learn2Learn website explicitly connects life skills to learning skills, by describing different characters in situations where they use similar skills to get what each of them wants.

Website users could include:

- Adult learners in diverse settings wanting to develop and practise learning to learn capacities and strategies
- Second chance learners wanting to work towards an achievable goal
- Participants in adult literacy programs
- Participants in vocational training programs
- Participants in introductory computer training programs
- Learners taking part in an orientation to a distance education or correspondence program
- Internet users who 'stumble' on it whilst searching the net
- Workers worried about on-site training
- Anyone wanting to focus on setting and reaching a goal
- Anyone!

The site is organised into 3 units. The complexity of the concepts addressed in each unit increases. Each unit has an organising premise:

Unit 1: **Getting started,** talks about life skills - what are the skills used in everyday life - naming them and providing examples of how people use them all the time.

Unit 2: **Action plans, small steps and milestones,** renames life skills as learning skills, showing what is involved in a bit more detail -introducing the concepts of reflection and review

Unit 3: **Building a learning system,** develops a system for using these skills in formal learning settings ie. a community education setting, and a workplace.

INSIDE EACH UNIT

Activities in each unit are presented in two complementary (hyperlinked) but discrete formats:

- Stories
- Skills

STORIES

The stories reflect a holistic approach to learning, based on authentic contexts. Each unit has two stories presented through audio files and simple animations. A transcript of the story can be printed. Each story has online activities that focus on the skills used by the character in the story.

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